

Living Like A Ghost by Carerra_os

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Summary:

Day 16 Nostalgia

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Author's Note:

Day Sixteen Nostalgia from the Harringrove April Prompts

Living Like A Ghost

It has been a year, a year of feeling empty, a year of feeling like he is the one that died that fourth of July night and in a way maybe he did because his heart had not been his anymore it belonged to Billy and he just feels like a hallowed husk now. No one knows why he walks around like a ghost because it had been a secret and even though it is over, Billy is gone, cremated by the military, Steve cannot talk about it, that would be dangerous in a small town like this. Sometimes he thinks Robin suspects but she never presses and even though he knows he could trust her with this secret love, it feels like some sort of betrayal to Billy, even after death to reveal their secret without his agreement.

His own house is one haunted memory, everyday something new triggers a fond memory that always ends in tears knowing he will never get that again. He has not changed anything since the last time Billy was there. Billy's leather jacket still hangs on the back of his desk chair, the ashtray by the window still half full of ash and buds, a pack of cigarettes and the book Billy was half way through resting on the nightstand all untouched. Steve stopped going in there just a few days after Starcourt, unable to bare the memories but they are inescapable the whole house is filled with them.

Even the guest room he has taken to sleeping in can drag him down in memories of the two of them making a mess of his bed before stumbling in there too tired to change the sheets, curling up together and giggling tiredly as they fought over who would be little spoon. Billy always won because Steve always let him, more than happy to

curl around Billy and breathe in the scent of him all night. He tries not to think of it, tries to block it out.

It is hard to eat when the kitchen has memories of Billy cooking dinner or breakfast, always half naked in a frilly apron from the cabinet, singing to the radio and lecturing Steve on feeding himself better. Hard to eat food at all, nothing tastes as good as Billy's food, all of it lacking flavor.

The living room has memories of date nights, movies and take out, of playing silly games and fighting over the remote. Of roaring fires on the coldest nights, the radio playing softly in the background as Billy read aloud to Steve, his head pillowed in his lap. Steve never thought he would have to miss listening to Billy read the Lord of the Rings trilogy to him but he misses it every night, tearing up anytime it is even mentioned.

Steve hates it here living in a ghost house, first his parents who just never bothered to come back and now Billy who never can. He should move, should find a little apartment where he is not just another ghost, where he can start over but he cannot bring himself to move out, to leave his memories behind. He cannot risk losing what he has left of Billy.

Steve gets ready for another droll day at work, dreading being in his car, with memories of driving around aimlessly, of Billy's feet on his dash, the last tape Billy made for him still in the player. He goes everywhere in silence, cannot listen to it without crying so hard he has to pull over, who knew Rock You Like A Hurricane could be such a tear jerker.

He cannot even drive to work without the memories threatening to pull him under, he has to take the long way to avoid the pool. But that means going by the dinner, filled with just as many memories, of footsie under the table, stealing fries off each other's plates, of sneaking off to the bathroom to make out for a minute in secret. Cigarettes in the parking lot, shoulders pressed together while they

pretended to just be begrudging friends as they chat while waiting to drive their respective party members home.

Family Video is just as bad as everywhere else, it just brings him back to movie nights, to arguing in the parking lot in one of their cars about what movies are appropriate for movie night, both of them having very strong opinions on the matter. He cannot even eat his favorite candy anymore. Milk duds are just another reminder because Billy always, always made sure to pick him up a box on movie nights.

It is midafternoon on a school day so seeing Max out front of the store when he pulls up is a little alarming. He worries as he gets out and she is running up to him before he even manages to close the door. "I need you to take me to this address, you have to come." She says holding up a napkin with an address messily scribbled on it.

"It's a school day and I have to work." Steve says, he has avoided all the upside down shit, every time something happens the kids jump to conclusion and Steve just refuses to take part in any of it, he cannot, not with Billy gone. Usually none of the kids bring it up to him, not any more, even Dustin has given up, he does not want to be drawn back in, has made that much very clear. "Shit" Steve hisses when Max kicks him to keep him from walking away and he bounces on one foot holding his throbbing ankle.

"You have to come, he asked for you!" She shouts angrily and something like hope flutters in his chest, before he beats it down.

"Who?" He still cannot help himself from asking.

"Billy" Her eyes are wet and he wants to believe her but he cannot, he just cannot. He gave up hope when they held a funeral a week after the mall burned to the ground. The whole town thinks Billy is the reason for their new found lack of entertainment because the

government covered him up, just like they covered up Barb. No one but those that were there that night and the government know the truth and Steve feels sick anytime he hears someone even mention the fourth of July.

“Don’t lie, not about him” He hisses, his own eyes wetting against his will and he hunches trying to hide, why would she come here and do this. As far as she knows they were barely even friends, hanging out because they often found themselves together because of the kids, nothing more. Why is she trying to use him to drag Steve into what has to be more upside down bullshit.

God he cannot do this, cannot deal with her, he has work, he turns heading back inside, when her arms come crashing around him with a “Steve please, just listen.” He is going to ignore her, dislodge her from his person and go to work and try not to have another breakdown in the backroom, Keith already gives him enough uncomfortable looks.

It is the glint of gold that pulls him up short, the thin gold chain wrapped over her hand a few times. It cannot be what he thinks it is, the government took everything, burned everything that came into contact with the upside down, even Steve’s and Robin’s Scoops Ahoy uniform despite neither of them being touched by the monster. The government claimed they burned Billy’s body, burned him and all of his clothing and possessions he had on him at the time but as Max twists her hand up, palm facing Steve he sees the pendent, the pendent he knows Billy was wearing that night.

“Where did you get that?” Steve asks, throat tight and ribs aching, he feels like he might puke or cry or both because that is Billy’s, he would know it anywhere. He spent hours with it heating against his cheek, felt the brush of it over his skin, has kissed it so many times when his feeling welled up and he was not brave enough to tell Billy he loved him.

“Billy” She locks her arms tighter around him when he goes to twist

away, burying her face in his back. "They said we couldn't tell anyone that it had to be a secret. I didn't know about you and him, I didn't know or I would have told you, I would have! It makes so much sense now, why you've been so sad, I'm so sorry."

"Max, what are you saying?" Steve knows he is openly crying, he can tell when Keith hesitates in the glass door, clearly ready to come out and yell at him before thinking better of it and disappearing further inside.

"He's alive Steve, Billy is alive, he's been in a coma all this time but he's alive and awake and he won't stop asking about you." Her tears are soaking the back of his shirt as he shakes, he crumples Max following him down, arms still around him as he tries to get a breath in.

"Steve?" Robin's hesitant voice comes and Steve blinks his eyes open to find her kneeling down in front of them, he does not know when he closed them.

"I, I can't come to work today." Steve gasps out trying not to hyperventilate, brain a warring thing of Billy is alive and that he has finally snapped and this is all some elaborate hallucination. He cannot stop shaking, cannot seem to pull himself together enough to even try and stand, how is he going to see this through, see which side of his brain is right, see if Billy is alive or if he has lost his mind.

"We have to go here" Max seems to already know he will be useless, holding the address out to Robin. "I could drive but-" She is shaking just like him, her wet no doubt blurry eyes pressed into his back and she does not have a license, Steve cannot possibly let her drive.

Steve sucks in a sharp breath when Robin reaches forward, her fingers touching the pendant, his own hand curling around it as soon as she pulls them away. "Alright let me just talk to Keith real quick, I'll take you." Steve tugs at the pendent and Max lets him unravel it

from her hand.

“He told me to give it to you, I, I told him how you’ve been when he asked, he figured you wouldn’t believe me, he wanted you to have tangible proof, that, that he well, he can say it when you see him. I didn’t know, I didn’t know or I would have told you, I’m so sorry.” She falls into apologizing again and it gives Steve something other than his own pain to focus on.

He twists until he is turned around and Max’s face is pressed into his chest, his own arms curling around her and he holds her. “It’s not your fault Max.” Billy had not felt safe with anyone knowing, so afraid of what Neil would do to him and Steve if he ever found out about them. They were always careful around town, especially when the kids were around, always putting on a little more bite for show.

They are still both crying by the time Robin comes back out and they move into the back of the car as she drives them.

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By the time they get there the tears have dried and Steve feels numb, brain solely focused on this is all some silly dream or an elaborate ruse and Billy is in fact dead, it does not stop him from clutching the pendent tight in the palm of his hand. It is a big nondescript building not unlike the one back in Hawkins and once again Steve and Robin are sworn to secrecy with the promise of a lot of horrible things should they break it by military personnel.

Steve is shaking again as they are led down a hall, Max leading with a familiarity, that explains why she has been around the party less and less since Neil Hargrove ran off with the hush money the government shelled out. His steps slow and Max comes back, grabs his hand and pulls him along at a slow steady pace, Robin lays a hand against his back and it helps, the both of them being here giving him support but there is still that fear trying to reach up and

choke him, that creeping disbelief that is sure this is all just a lie.

They make it to a door that Max opens without hesitation and Steve does not realize he started holding his breath until he gasps, staring. "Is this real, is that you Billy or am I dreaming?" He asks softly, it looks like Billy. He is not the same as the last time Steve saw him, hair cropped short and he is thin, so thin, he looks frail and pale, Steve never thought Billy would ever be without his radiant golden tan. Steve has tears in his eyes, he looks real, so he hopes Billy is real and he has not finally lost it.

"It's me, pretty boy, don't cream your pants." Steve lets out a wet laugh as Billy tosses his own words back at him, that November night seems like a lifetime ago. The apology that had followed after Max had spilled the beans about the Upside Down to Billy, a doorway to everything that followed. To the comradeship, the tension, lingering looks, the comfort of having someone his own age other than Johnathan and Nancy to talk to about the horrors, the first kiss at the quarry when Steve could not sleep, to worried monster might come back and Billy avoiding the monster living in his own home.

Steve rushes forward and throws his arms around Billy, full on crying, Billy gives a little noise at the weight suddenly pressing him down against the bed but his arms come up around Steve. "I thought you were dead, I thought I lost you!" Steve sobs into Billy's chest soaking the hospital gown in his tears, he vaguely hears the door shut as Robin and Max leave them.

"I know baby, I know." Billy is crying too, Steve can feel his tears drip into his hair where Billy has pressed his face. "I'm not though, they managed to keep me alive, I'm sorry it took this long to get back to you." Billy rasps against Steve, arms weak around his shoulders and Steve eases off and realizes he might be causing Billy some discomfort.

"I've missed you so much Billy. I was so lost after, after-" Steve cuts himself off as he remembers that night, remembers the blood and the

pain and it is a hazy thing because of the drugs but it haunts him just as much as every other memory. Billy's hands come up with scars blooming through the center of his palms making Steve even sadder at the proof, a reminder of Starcourt branded into Billy's skin.

"You look like shit pretty boy, you haven't been taking care of yourself, you look almost as bad as me." Steve wants to laugh and cry at the same time, he wants to draw back and hide and throw himself back into Billy's space, the six inches between their chest feeling like too much. Steve knows how he looks even though most days he cannot stand to look in the mirror, he has been wasting away since that night he thought Billy died, feeling like he died that night too.

But here Billy is right in front of him, tangible and real and his heart feels like it is beating again for the first time in a year. "I love you" Steve blurts it out, cannot hold it in any longer after a year of missing, a year of mourning, he is not willing to keep it locked away any more.

A little bit of panic fills him as Billy's hands drop away and the pendant is tugged free of his tight grip but it washes away just as fast as it come when Billy unlatches the chain and wraps is around Steve's neck, hooking it closed, the pendant hanging against his chest as Billy's hands come back up and cup his face again. "I fucking love you to, so I need you to take care of yourself, I've got a long recovery and worrying about you keeling over is the last thing I need." Billy says, mouth pressing against Steve's lips and he has not felt that in so long, hands coming up clutch at Billy's shoulder as he cries a little harder, god he missed him so much.

-End

Author's Note:

<https://ghostofjellyfishforgotten.tumblr.com/>